

THE GLORY of the IMPOSSIBLE

SAMUEL M. ZWEMER

WHEN Isaiah saw the glory of God and He laid on him the burden of all the gentile nations, his message was greater than he ever imagined. *"The burden of Arabia."* (Isaiah 21:13) And Arabia became the Cradle of Islam. And Islam, after thirteen centuries, became a challenge to Faith and, with other larger and more important Moslem lands, confronts us with the Glory of the Impossible: and that is my theme.

How well I remember my colleague, Canon Gairdner in Cairo, a most brilliant scholar and devout Christian, strike his desk and say, "Zwemer, the problem of Islam is impossible of solution." One of the saintliest of missionaries, Miss Lilius Trotter of North Africa, wrote just before her death: "We who are engaged in Moslem work live in a land of blighted promises. That is a fact that none of us who love its people best can deny; and the deadly heart-sickness of hope deferred sometimes makes even the most optimistic of us almost despair of seeing abiding fruitage to the work." No wonder that whole sections of the Christian Church have thrown off this burden as intolerable even in our day.

Now there are five reasons why this religion of Mohammed today challenges all Christendom to really rethink the problem, to renew their faith, and to rekindle their love for Moslems.

1. *The Verdict of History and of Christian Theology* on Mohammed and his system contains impossible contradictions. Was Mohammed a true prophet? Was he The (or a) false prophet? Is Islam a Christian or a Jewish heresy? Or can it be grouped with the other lesser non-Christian religions? No other ethnic religion has been so thoroughly studied, explained, explored (or explained away) as has Islam.

Anyone who has read Margoliouth's *Life of Mohammed* or Tor Andrae's proofs that Mohammed was in close touch

with Nestorian Christians and had opportunity to learn of Christ, must face the theological-historical problem of *Why Islam?* because this religion was in no sense a preparation for Christianity but its defeat and overthrow. The Arabian Prophet claimed not only to supplement but to supersede Jesus Christ. Islam is a palimpsest of the true Gospel. Islam is the moon that has eclipsed the Sun of Righteousness. Islam is enemy of the Gospel to this day.

II. *The colossal dimensions of the world of Islam* and its steady increase make the task of evangelism apparently impossible. One eighth of the population of the globe, 315 million souls, are adherents of this faith — held fast in the bonds of its brotherhood. Most of the unoccupied mission fields of the world are still the great Moslem areas and populations. Northern Africa and Central Asia are examples as are also Afghanistan, Western and Central Arabia, Madagascar and Somaliland. There are more Moslems in China than in all Persia and Arabia. Nearly four million Mohammedans live in Europe. Ninety million live in the two states of Pakistan and Hindustan. They are building the third great mosque in London and one in Washington. There are Moslems in Pittsburgh, Chicago, and California and even in Grand Haven, Michigan.

Moreover, the Moslem press, the Pilgrimage to Mecca, the great Darwish Orders and the Arabic alphabet and Koran have knit together this complex of races and languages and tribes and nations into one strange solidarity, the Moslem world, for which some have coined a new word, *Islamdom!* It is not in any dictionary but it is an impossible reality. All Islamdom faces Christendom in the year of our Lord 1950.

III. *Islam is a totalitarian political faith.* It was that from the outset and is that today. The preacher in every mosque pulpit on Fridays holds a wooden or steel sword as symbol of conquest. "Islam is not a state-church; it is far more, a church-state," as Lord Curzon said.

The Caliphate has disappeared, yet in every part of the Islamic world there is a religious nationalism which is often strongly reactionary. This is the chief political problem today. Doors are closing in Turkey, Egypt and Iran that were open

even in the days of the Caliphate. In Pakistan they have gone back to an Islamic State with the old laws and restrictions being restored. It is the political aspect of Islam that causes unrest in the Near East, North Africa and Indonesia. Islam is a key piece on the checkerboard of global politics. What Karl Peters said in 1907 to Kaiser Wilhelm, the Soviet is saying today: "If our policy is only bold enough, we can enlist moslems."

IV. *Islam is a social problem that baffles us by its extent and its tenacity.* Social reforms have again and again been attempted and failed by the recoil due to religious forces. The undertow has turned back the rising tide.

In a recent article on the moral and spiritual situation in Iran, a Presbyterian missionary, John Elder, of Teheran, writes: "After many years of partial eclipse, the Moslem sun is today shining forth in much of its former glory." "The veil is rapidly coming back, with many young women wearing it for the first time in their lives. In many cities and even in sections of Teheran it is positively dangerous for an unveiled woman to be seen in the streets. Recently a large sign appeared over the entrance to Teheran's big department store that read, 'Unveiled women will refrain from entering'."

V. *Most of all, as religion Islam offers impossible difficulties to the missionaries and to the convert.* It is almost impossible to present the Christian Gospel to a Moslem without giving offense, for "It is to offer the proudest man in the world the thing which he hates at the hand of one whom he despises." This is the burden of Arabia, of Turkey, of Egypt.

Back of all other problems and difficulties is the inner character of this religion. It is at once the most Christian and the most anti-Christian of all the non-Christian religions. More articles of the Apostles' Creed are accepted by an orthodox Moslem than by a thorough-going liberal Christian. The Moslem confesses: I believe in God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, who suffered and was taken up into heaven and shall come again. I believe in a Holy Spirit, in the forgiveness

of sin, in the brotherhood of true believers, in the bodily resurrection and Life everlasting."

What is left out? *The very heart of the Gospel.* Between these basic agreements there yawns a chasm of contradictions deepened by thirteen centuries of misunderstanding and lack of comprehension.

The Mohammedan says Christ is not God's son but He is only the son of Mary. The Mohammedan says that Jesus never died on the cross; but that He was taken to heaven and Judas died in His place. The story, otherwise, would not end correctly from this standpoint.

Speak of Christ's Cross and of the Atonement, and the Moslem says that God is almighty and can forgive sins without the atonement because He has all power in heaven and on earth. Speak to him of the matchless character of Jesus Christ, and the modern Mohammedan will turn to the gospel record, and will try to show you: that Jesus lost His temper in cursing the fig tree, that He was unkind to His mother, that He was drunk at the last supper and threw aside His garments! How can one answer such terrible travesty of the Old, Old Story and do it with patience and love that will not let them go on in their ignorance and pitiful need of peace within?

Again, there is the paradox that although the Gospel is so highly spoken of and declared to be the very Word of God, yet neither in the Koran nor in the Moslem Tradition have we anywhere an adequate account of the real content of Christ's message. On the contrary, they both, deny His deity, the finality of His teaching, the fact of His death for sin on the Cross, and His glorious resurrection. This is, therefore, at once an invitation and a rebuff to evangelism among Moslems. An invitation, because they, too, love Jesus the son of Mary and are always glad to hear more about Him; a rebuff, because the deepest truths meet with denial and the Cross of Christ, to us a glory, is to them a stumbling-block. The paradox is this: *our Gospel is lauded because of its label but libeled because of its contents.* Was there ever such an age-long and world-wide misunderstanding as that between the Cross and the Crescent?

After forty years of experience and visits to nearly every Moslem land, we have given five reasons why the challenge of Islam to the Christian faith is the glory of the impossible. Historically we are baffled to explain *Why Islam*; statistically the enormous population of the world of Islam precludes its evangelization in one generation; politically we witness the closing of doors once open and the iron curtain of thirteen centuries shuts Mecca and Medina against all Christians; socially this religion is a most gigantic problem because of its attitude toward womanhood; preaching of the Gospel to a single Moslem and its acceptance by him present impossible situations, contradictions and perils, because of their law of apostasy.

"The word 'impossible,'" said Napoleon, "is found only in the dictionaries of fools." But it is used in the Bible. "With man this is impossible but with God all things are possible." "Nothing shall be impossible to you," said our Master (Matt. 17:20).

Look at the actual situation. Think of the thin red line, Christ's vanguard, His lonely sentinels. In Egypt, eighty years of unremitting sacrificial toil by the noblest of men and women, yet scarcely 500 Moslem converts in all Egypt today! In Iran and Iraq some thousands have received Baptism. In Java there are 32,000 Christians won from Islam. But in Arabia, the cradle of Islam, sixty years of pioneer effort against prejudice, loneliness and a deadly climate — hospitals, schools, evangelism, toil, tears and blood, yielded only a handful of Christians. (Luke 5:5).

North Africa, which once boasted of Augustine, Athanasius, Cyprian, Tertullian, thousands of churches and scores of bishoprics, now counts scarcely a single organized Christian community (except the Copts of Egypt). One missionary stationed in all of Tripoli keeping vigil; *none in all of Western Arabia*; three little stations in all of Central Asia, a few waiting wistfully on the borders of Afghanistan. Two or three actually faced fearful odds but remain undiscouraged. (I can hear this cry:)

*"More than half beaten but fearless,
Facing the storm and the night."*

Theirs is the glory of the impossible. None of them would exchange places with us because they are confident of the issue. They see the invisible, lay hold of the intangible, hear the inaudible voices. "Lo I am with you!"

For you cannot tabulate loneliness, nor plot the curve of hope deferred which makes the heart sick. Yet these are the things that make the difference between the shedding of ink and the shedding of blood. The end of a survey is only the beginning of the missionary enterprise. One man with God at a mission station is a majority. All arithmetic fails when you deal with spiritual realities. Yet it is the imponderable forces which will determine victory or defeat, and because we believe that the imponderables of the Kingdom of Light are on our side, we believe that opportunity is not the last word in missions. *The appeal of the closed door is even greater than of the one which is open.* The open door beckons; the closed door may be a challenge to love or to authority. "A lover laughs at locksmiths." An Ambassador enters with authority. It is the strength of these imponderable forces, that is to say, the reality of the invisible, which enables the missionary to look upward with confidence and see by faith like John on Patmos the future result of his toil in "the great multitude which no man can number," a world where statistics are inadequate to express realities, where finance and budgets have lost significance and gold is used for paving-stones! "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit."

*"Uplifted are the gates of brass,
The bars of iron yield
To let the King of Glory pass,
The Cross hath won the field."*

(This article from the Church Herald of September 1, 1950 was delivered as an address at Princeton Theological Seminary and at Grand Haven, Michigan by Dr. Zwemer. It has been translated and reprinted in two German mission magazines in Germany.)

Board of Foreign Missions
Reformed Church in America
156 Fifth Avenue
New York 10, N. Y.